

Pathogen priming affects preferences for male and female body weight

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Research suggests that implicit cues regarding environmental factors such as resource availability can influence preferences for body weight. This research has shown that individual levels of hunger effect preferences for female body weight. It is therefore possible that the way we perceive bodies could also be affected by other environmental factors such as levels of disease and the potential existence of pathogens. Indeed research with faces has shown effects of pathogen priming on face preferences. However, as far as we know, pathogen priming studies have only used face stimuli with no research looking at the effects of pathogen priming on body weight preferences. Here participants had their body preferences measured before and after experiencing either pathogen primes, neutral primes or no primes at all. The findings indicate that pathogen priming (exposing participants to information regarding pathogens) causes participants to shift their preferences for male and female body weight, rating heavier bodies to be more attractive and healthy after being primed. Since body weight is a good visual cue to better health heavier bodies have the direct benefits of being free from infectious disease and in mate choice would result in an increase likelihood of healthy offspring. Therefore this suggests we have an evolved set of cognitive mechanisms that aid us with the detection of cues signalling environmental threat which consequently leads us to become more aware of visual health cues in environments where we perceive there is a greater risk of disease.